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ABSTRACT

The fact that a textbook presents a codified method does not mean that this textbook is an accurate representation of what happened in practice. Without verification, without records of teachers' practices, without student writing and comment, all the discipline of composition studies has is an idealized record of what should have been. This outside source material is where oral history comes in. While it is far too late to reclaim much information from the earliest years of composition teaching in this country, there is still the opportunity to retrieve the rest--if scholars hurry. Of primary importance is that scholars realize the necessity of having access to the information around them, how to locate it, and how to preserve it. Secondly, scholars must educate themselves in dealing with such information--where to find it, how to "do" it. To this end, they must know the methods of oral history--how to construct useful questions, how to conduct interviews, how to record and transcribe the materials they get, when and how to ask for collateral materials. They must also be aware that history is far more complex than dates and significant events. It is a comprehensive record of society. Modern composition scholars should keep thorough records of their own work for study by future generations. (Contains a 16-item selected bibliography of sources available on oral history and related disciplines.) (TB)

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Oral History is Not Just Oral and Not Entirely History: Gleanings in the Field

Who are we? Where did we come from? How did we get here? To answer these questions we must have the fullest understanding possible of composition historiography. To achieve this understanding we cannot rely entirely on formal documentation -- the textbooks, the scholarly essays, the conference presentations. We must also turn to the people -- the teachers and the students -- and to those informal records that they have left and are leaving behind them.

As we are all aware, the fact that a textbook presents a codified method does not mean that this textbook is an accurate representation of what happened in practice. Without verification, without records of teachers' practices, without student writing and comment, all we have is an idealized record of what should have been. Without outside sources we would not know that in 1786, student "Smith" was not enthusiastic about composition assignments and "procrastinated and dithered" over them, often completing them after the due date, surely a situation we can all relate to today.

This outside source material is where oral history comes in. While it is far too late to reclaim much information from the earliest years of composition teaching in this country, we still have the opportunity to retrieve the rest -- if we hurry. As we speak whole generations of students and teachers, whole volumes of useful information are passing from our grasp. But also as we speak, one of our colleagues is in another session delivering a

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paper on one-room schools. Many of her informants are in their eighties and nineties, but her work has preserved their stories for our use.

Of primary importance is that we all must realize the necessity of having access to the information around us, how to locate it and how to preserve it. That little old lady in the nursing home may have been an English teacher for forty years; the older couple down the street may have generations' worth of diaries and papers in the attic; the local historical society might have piles of unclassified documents collecting dust and mold in the basement. All of these sources will be lost unless we take the initiative to appreciate and preserve them -- to make sure that their worth is known.

Secondly, we should educate ourselves in dealing with such information -- where to find it, how to "do" it. The best way to find information is to ask questions -- talk to people, ask about papers donated to archives and historical societies, put ads in the newspapers for old textbooks, student papers, syllabi and lesson plans, diaries. Much of the early material will be "archival" rather than oral, but we must not delay in assembling interview materials from the people "in the trenches."

To that end we must know the methods of oral history -- how to construct useful questions, how to conduct interviews, how to record and transcribe the materials we get, when and how to ask for collateral materials. The particular value of oral history methodology is that it can be unearth a wealth of material, useful to many lines of inquiry. It can yield not only multi-

disciplinary applications -- to history, to anthropology, to folklore studies, to linguistics, to psychology -- but also can incorporate research methodologies from these other disciplines to further enhance our understanding of composition in the United States.

We must be aware also that history is far more complex than dates and significant events, and oral history more than the interesting stories or amusing ramblings of some Senior Citizen. It is a comprehensive record of society -- manifested in letters and diaries, conversations, folk tales and songs, and memories -- not only informing a specific topic but also providing a sociological panorama indispensible for properly locating our historiography.

To this end, we must also realize that history is not just THE PAST, it is also the present. While we are excavating our predecessors' contributions to the field, we must also preserve our own, letting the frustrations we experience with missing information and unanswered questions guide us in saving our present for the future. Someday the detritus that collects in our offices -- the syllabi and lesson plans, our students' writings -- will be as valuable to other historiographers as that precious interview with a James Berlin or the working journals of a P. J. Corbett are to us. It is these artifacts of our field, not the textbooks, that give us warmth, humanness, connection and illustrate the truth of Ann E. Berthoff's words ". . . we teachers have more to learn from one another than all the psychologists in the world have to tell us."

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